

A Note from the Managing Editor

Dear -----:

This is a very interesting article and it provides further insight into the Black Lives Matter movement. It also sheds light on the dangers of bad editing which we like to feature periodically. I say we publish it.

I've made a few small changes that I would like you to make before sending the document on to the copyeditor. Most of these edits include grammatical and punctuation errors, though I also edited for consistency. In particular, Dean-Burren should be a hyphenated last name. There were a few places you left out the hyphen and you might double-check to make sure I caught them all.

Please forward the original copy with track changes included to keep a full record of our edits.

Heloise Abtahi
Managing Editor, NPR

Why Calling Slaves 'Workers' Is More Than An Editing Error

Coby Burren was reading his text book, sitting in geography class at Pearland High School near Houston, when he noticed a troubling caption. The 15-year-old quickly took a picture with his phone and sent it to his mother.

Next to a map of the United States describing patterns of immigration, it read that the Atlantic slave trade brought "millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations."

"We was real hard workers wasn't we" Coby texted, adding a sarcastic emoji.
Coby caught a textbook error that had been missed by several editorial layers, starting with mega publisher McGraw-Hill Education, followed by the official textbook reviewers and, finally, members of the Texas Board of Education who have the final say on materials like this.

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Roni Dean-Burren, Coby's mother, is a former teacher pursuing her doctorate at the University of Houston. For her, "that word — 'workers' — was an attempt to erase that hard writing that slavery has had on the paper of our society." She points out that, while the book describes many Europeans immigrating as indentured servants, she found no mention in this lesson of Africans forced to the U.S. as slaves.

Several weeks ago, Dean Burren blasted the publisher in an online video that's been viewed nearly 2 million times. For her, the caption's language speaks to larger issues of social justice and the Black Lives Matter movement. "[The slaves'] stories, their lives, their bodies — they didn't matter enough to call it what it was," she says.

#-indent The story has renewed a national debate about how textbooks deal with race and slavery — especially the power of language and grammar as tools to interpret history, already a subjective area to teach.

Dean Burren also has begun scrutinizing other books. "And there are other mistakes," she recently posted on social media. "I'm looking at the U.S. history books right now. There are some word choices in these books that I think most people would find problematic. We can do better, so let's!"

Both the publisher and Texas officials have agreed that the caption was inappropriate. But it's not clear if or how much the adoption process for new textbooks will change.

In the past year, Texas textbooks have been criticized for listing Moses as a Founding Father and for downplaying slavery as a cause of the Civil War. Those issues stemmed from the learning standards that the Texas State Board of Education sets to guide publishers.

But David Levin, CEO of McGraw Hill Education, believes this mistake was an editorial error and not a problem with the standards or what he calls a "transparent" adoption process. It was a terrible error, and the minute we saw it we said, 'We've got to sort it out,' Levin says.

There are 100,000 copies of the book in Texas, tens of thousands more around the country, and the company is scrambling to fix the problem.

It will ship corrected copies to schools for free, or it will provide a sticker to cover the caption, along with a lesson plan about the cultural context of language.

While Levin stands behind the rest of McGraw-Hill Education's materials, he admits they need to review their books more carefully. In particular, the CEO wants more "cold reads." Those evaluate individual lessons on a stand-alone basis, which is basically what Coby Burren did when he spotted the error.

In Texas, some state officials are considering how to improve their textbook adoption process. One idea is to have more diversity among reviewers who are nominated by the state board.

"Everybody admits it shouldn't have happened, so let's figure out how to prevent it in the future," says Thomas Ratliff, Vice Chair of the Texas Board of Education. The board's 15 elected members approve the final materials for 5 million Texas students.

Still, Ratliff, a republican, found 16 other references to slavery in the geography book that he believes were accurate. He says the story of that one, problematic caption has "gotten blown out of proportion."

Dean-Burren disagrees. She's concerned about the words textbooks use - or don't - to teach our nation's rich history. Still, she's proud of her son and the lesson he's learned.

"He knows that his voice matters," Dean Burren says, "and that he'll be heard."